

Message Text

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FM AMEMBASSY PARIS

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INFO AMCONSUL BORDEAUX

AMCONSUL LYON

AMCONSUL MARSEILLE

AMCONSUL MARTINIQUE

AMCONSUL NICE

AMCONSUL STRASBOURG

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E.O. 11652: N/A

TAGS: PINT, FR

SUBJECT: ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION WITH DIRECTOR FOR POLITICAL STUDIES OF LEADING POLLING INSTITUTE

1. SUMMARY. IN A RECENT MEETING WITH EMBOFFS, JEROME JOFFRE, DIRECTOR FOR POLITICAL STUDIES FOR SOFRES, PROVIDED SOME INTERESTING INSIGHTS INTO THE CURRENT POLITICAL SITUATION IN FRANCE DRAWING ON HIS POLLING EXPERIENCE. WHILE MUCH OF WHAT HE SAID HAS BEEN PREVIOUSLY REPORTED BY THE EMBASSY, HIS COMMENTS WILL PROVIDE USEFUL BACKGROUND FOR ANALYZING THE FLOOD OF POLLS WHICH WILL CONTINUE TO INUNDATE THE FRENCH SCENE DURING THE ELECTION PERIOD. END SUMMARY.

2. JOFFRE NOTED THAT THE CURRENT POLITICAL CLIMATE REFLECTS A POPULAR DISSATISFACTION WITH THE PRESENT REGIME, A SITUATION CHARACTERIZED BY TWO FACTORS: (1)

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THE RISE OF THE PS WHICH NOW HOLDS 28-30 PERCENT OF VOTER INTENTIONS, AND (2) WHAT JOFFRE TERMED AN "EXECUTIVE CRISIS," AN UNPRECEDENTED DECLINE IN GISCARD'S POPULARITY (ALL THE MORE STARTLING WHEN VIEWED IN COMPARISON WITH OTHER FIFTH REPUBLIC PRESIDENTS AT THEIR LOW POINTS), AND A CONCOMITANT LOW LEVEL OF SUPPORT FOR PRIME MINISTER BARRE. JOFFRE ATTRIBUTED THIS CRISIS TO TWO CAUSES:

THE WEAKENING OF THE TRADITIONAL DEFERENCE THAT THE FRENCH HAVE FOR THE OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT A "DE-SANCTIFICATION" THAT HAS BEEN ACCELERATED BY CERTAIN ACTIONS BY THE PRESENT INCUMBENT, SUCH AS DINNERS WITH THE "COMMON PEOPLE," AND SECONDLY, MANY OF GISCARD'S PROPOSED REFORMS (TAX ON CAPITAL GAINS, REFORM OF ENTERPRISES) HAVE NOT HAD WIDESPREAD PUBLIC SUPPORT AND HAVE BEEN NEITHER EFFECTIVELY IMPLEMENTED NOR EXPLAINED.

3. AMONG THE TOPICS DISCUSSED, THE FOLLOWING WERE OF PARTICULAR INTEREST:

A. PERCENTAGE OF VOTES NEEDED FOR LEFT VICTORY:
CONFIRMING WHAT WE HAVE PREVIOUSLY REPORTED, JOFFRE INDICATED THAT THE LEFT WOULD HAVE TO OBTAIN MORE THAN 50 PERCENT OF THE POPULAR VOTE IN ORDER TO WIN A MAJORITY OF SEATS IN THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY. THIS RESULTS FROM A COMBINATION OF FACTORS: A) LEFT GAINS HAVE BEEN MADE PARTLY IN DISTRICTS WHERE THESE GAINS WILL NOT AFFECT THE EVENTUAL OUTCOME OF AN ELECTION; B) IN CASES OF RUN-OFFS, THE MAJORITY WILL CERTAINLY BEAT THE BUSHES FOR VOTES AND RALLY BEHIND ITS CANDIDATE, WHATEVER THE PARTY, IN ORDER TO DEFEAT THE LEFT OPPOSITION. ADDITIONALLY, THERE ARE USUALLY VOTERS WHO VOTE FOR THE OPPOSITION OR ABSTAIN ON THE FIRST ROUND OF VOTING IN PROTEST AGAINST THE GOVERNMENT, WHO TEND TO VOTE FOR THE MAJORITY CANDIDATE ON THE SECOND ROUND OF BALLOTING. THUS, IT WILL BE IMPORTANT FOR A LEFT CANDIDATE TO OBTAIN UNITED LEFT SUPPORT IN THE SECOND ROUND OF VOTING; C) HOWEVER, AS WAS SHOWN IN LAST SPRING'S CANTONAL ELECTED LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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TIONS AND NOVEMBER'S PARTIAL LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS, IN SECOND ROUND BALLOTING THE LEFT CANDIDATE RECEIVED LESS VOTES THAN THE COMBINED FIRST ROUND LEFT TOTAL, INDICATING THAT SOME PC VOTERS WERE NOT SUPPORTING PS CANDIDATES IN THE SECOND ROUND, AND VICE VERSA. THIS IS NOT A NEW PROBLEM, BUT RECENTLY THE NUMBER OF SUCH "DEFLECTIONS" SEEMS TO BE INCREASING; D) FINALLY, THE CURRENT DISTRICT GERRYMANDERING FAVORS THE MAJORITY PARTIES. COMMENT: JOFFRE CITED 52 PERCENT AS THE MAGIC FIGURE WHICH THE LEFT WOULD HAVE TO GET IN ORDER TO WIN A NATIONAL ASSEMBLY MAJORITY. OTHER ESTIMATES ARE THAT THE PERCENTAGE OF VOTES NEEDED MAY BE AS HIGH AS 54 PERCENT. WITHOUT GETTING INTO A NUMBER GAME, SUFFICE TO SAY THAT THE PS CONSIDERS 53 PERCENT OF THE POPULAR VOTE TO BE A LEVEL AT WHICH THEY WOULD FEEL "SAFE". END COMMENT.

B. A RETURN TO PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION?:
DESPITE RUMORS ABOUT A POSSIBLE GOVERNMENT INITIATIVE AIMED AT A RETURN TO PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION, MANY OF THE MAJOR PARTIES REMAIN SKEPTICAL. EVEN THOUGH IT

IS AN ELEMENT OF THE COMMON PROGRAM, THE LEFT, AND
ESPECIALLY THE PS, DOES NOT WANT TO ROCK THE BOAT AT A

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TIME WHEN IT FEELS THAT IT CAN WIN UNDER THE PRESENT
ELECTORAL SYSTEM. THE RPR, WHICH HAS BEEN HELPED IN
THE PAST BY A MAJORITY VOTE SYSTEM, IS RELUCTANT TO UND-
ERTAKE ANY CHANGES WHICH WOULD UNDOUBTEDLY LOWER ITS
PARLIAMENTARY REPRESENTATION. AND FINALLY, THE CURRENT
MAJORITY IS NOT YET CONVINCED THAT IT IS DOOMED TO LOSE
THE NEXT LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS UNDER THE PRESENT SYSTEM.

C. MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS: JOFFRE AGREED THAT THE
MAJORITY WILL HAVE AN UPHILL FIGHT NEXT MARCH AND WILL
MOST PROBABLY LOSE CONTROL OF SEVERAL IMPORTANT CITIES
TO THE LEFT. WHILE NOT UNDERESTIMATING THE ACTUAL EFFECT
THAT THIS MAY HAVE IN PREPARATION FOR NATIONAL LEGISLA-
TIVE ELECTIONS IN 1978, THE IMPORTANT BATTLE IS THE
PARIS MAYORALTY. SHOULD THE MAJORITY -- AND PARTICULARLY
D'ORNANO -- LOSE HERE, IT WOULD HAVE SERIOUS CONSEQUEN-
CES FOR GISCARD'S PRESTIGE. CONVERSELY, SHOULD D'ORNANO
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BE ELECTED MAYOR OF PARIS, IT WILL BE A PSYCHOLOGICAL SHOT IN THE ARM FOR GISCARD, EVEN IF THE MAJORITY DOES NOT FARE WELL IN OTHER MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS. CHIRAC'S ENTRY INTO THE RACE (SEPTEL) WILL FURTHER COMPLICATE THE PRESIDENT'S GAME PLAN.

D. PARTY CONSTITUENCIES: JOFFRE NOTED THAT THE RPR IS WOEFULLY DEFICIENT IN ATTRACTING ADHERENTS FROM AMONG WORKERS, WHO COMPRISE LESS THAN 15 PERCENT OF THE PARTY MAKEUP, WHEREAS WORKERS IN GENERAL REPRESENT 30 PERCENT OF ALL VOTERS. MOREOVER, JOFFRE SEES THE CURRENT RPR STRATEGY AS AIMING TO REGAIN THOSE TRADITIONAL UDR/RPR VOTERS WHO ARE NOW INTENDING TO VOTE SOCIALIST. THE BASIC PROBLEM IS THAT THE RPR IS NOT YET BITING INTO THE TRADITIONAL PS ELECTORATE. JOFFRE UNDERSCORED WHAT PREVIOUS POLLS HAVE SHOWN, NAMELY THAT THOSE PARTIES UNDER THE PRESIDENTIAL MAJORITY LABEL ARE LOSING VOTES AMONG CADRES, THE MIDDLE CLASS AND WHITE COLLAR WORKERS -- THEIR TRADITIONAL ELECTORATE. THE FACT THAT MORE OF THE POLITICAL ELITE NOW BELIEVE THAT THE LEFT WILL WIN IN 1978 IS ADDING A PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTOR TO THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN. IN THEIR MINDS, THE PS IS ASSUMING AN IMAGE OF REFORM AND MODERATION AS THE DOMINANT PARTNER IN A "CENTER-LEFT" PS-PC-MRG COALITION ABLE TO COPE WITH ECONOMIC PROBLEMS AT LEAST AS WELL AS THE PRESENT GOVERNMENT. DESPITE INCREASED PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF THE PC AS A SUBORDINATE PARTY TO THE PS IN THE UNION OF THE LEFT, JOFFRE NOTED THAT CURRENT TRENDS SHOW THE PC GAINING MORE VOTES AMONG THE YOUNG IN COMPARISON TO THE PS (31 PERCENT FOR THE PC VERSUS 28 PERCENT FOR THE PS). THUS, IT IS NOT AT ALL CLEAR THAT THE TWENTY YEAR DECLINE IN THE NUMBER OF PC VOTES WILL CONTINUE IN THE FUTURE.

4. POLLS: IN RESPONSE TO SOME PUBLIC CRITICISMS THAT THERE HAVE BEEN "TOO MANY POLLS", JOFFRE REPLIED THAT THERE IS, INSTEAD, A DEARTH OF GOOD POLLS. HE CITED THE LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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RECENT IFOP/PARIS-MATCH POLL (PARIS 37677) PREDICTING LARGE GAINS FOR THE LEFT IN NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS AS AN EXTRAPOLATION OF MORE LIMITED POLL RESULTS THAT THE EDITORS OF PARIS-MATCH SHOULD NOT HAVE PUBLISHED. PERHAPS THIS REFLECTED THE GENERAL MEDIA ATMOSPHERE, AS HE NOTED THAT THE NEWS MEDIA IN DECEMBER HAD OVER-EMPHASIZED THE PLIGHT OF THE MAJORITY, AND THAT

ONLY RECENTLY HAS COVERAGE RETURNED TO A MORE NORMAL --
AND RESPONSIBLE -- LEVEL. FINALLY JOFFRE FELT THAT IT
MIGHT BE IN THE INTEREST OF THE TWO TOP POLLING INSTITU-
TES, IFOP AND SOFRES, TO ESTABLISH A SET OF COMMON
STANDARDS WHICH WOULD MINIMIZE THE IMPORTANCE OF POORLY-
CONDUCTED PUBLIC OPINION POLLS DONE BY LESSER ORGANIZA-
TIONS, OFTEN WITH POLITICAL MOTIVATIONS. AS A USEFUL
CAVEAT, JOFFRE REITERATED THAT GIVEN THE STILL NARROW
MARGIN BETWEEN MAJORITY AND OPPOSITION VOTER
INTENTIONS, ONE SHOULD NOT ACCEPT AS GOSPEL EVEN THE
MOST ACCURATE POLLING INSTITUTES (IFOP AND SOFRES)
FOURTEEN MONTHS BEFORE THE ACTUAL LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS.
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Message Attributes

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Disposition Approved on Date:
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Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 22 May 2009
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
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Enclosure: n/a
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